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MORAY HOUSE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

**An introspective account and critical evaluation of an e-moderator's  
experience teaching in an online pilot EFL course**

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## Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of the e-moderator, taking account of the skills required, and the processes involved, in creating and teaching an online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course. It also details those theories which are applicable to online learning and how they are represented through various models, thus creating a framework to assist the e-moderation process. In particular, Salmon's five-stage model (2004) is analysed to assess its effectiveness in helping to prepare a new e-moderator to teach in an online environment. Qualitative self-study research is conducted involving an analysis of the e-moderator's reflective journal. This method can be particularly insightful, uncovering the e-moderator's beliefs, perceptions and challenges encountered throughout the process. Thus, in-depth data is collected and used in evaluating an approach to e-moderation. It reveals how Salmon's five-stage model and others can be considerably helpful although not sufficient, in themselves, for successful online teaching and learning. In this regard, a critical appraisal and detailed analysis of Salmon's model relating to this research, is conducted to assess the skills required to become a successful e-moderator. This research reveals not only the complexities, problems, responsibilities and challenges encountered but also the tremendous rewards from the e-moderation process. Such research can encouragingly provide other practitioners with a valuable insight into the process and leads to recommendations demanding further research. In conclusion it is apparent that using systematic frameworks, such as Salmon's five-stage model, are extremely useful for effective scaffolding but are not sufficient on their own in producing a successful e-moderation process. It is suggested therefore, that additional support and continual encouragement should be provided to motivate and engage students in both synchronous and asynchronous interactions. Moreover, consideration should be given to specific pedagogy and social cultural factors when designing and implementing an online course.

*Key words:* TESOL, e-moderation, self-study, e-learning, five-stage model.

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I hereby provide consent for this dissertation to be used by staff and students of Edinburgh University for future reference.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Rationale

The purpose of this study is to consider the skills necessary and theories required to teach language learners within a fully online learning environment. A pivotal reason for carrying out such research was the observation of a continuing and heated debate on the potential for using technology to learn English (IATEFL, 2011). Hockly (2011), states that more research is required into the effectiveness of Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL), and she affirms that it is not the technology itself, but rather how it is used, which can impact on learning. In accordance with Salmon (2011: ix), "Successful online learning depends on teachers and trainers acquiring new competencies, on their becoming aware of its potential and on inspiring the learners, rather than on mastering technology". Hockly (2011: n.p.) emphasises that "more rigorous research into ICT [Information and Communications Technology] use is needed to be able to assess impacts on language abilities." In addition, Thornbury (2011) indicates the potential for the use of technology in learning, but remains sceptical of its effectiveness. He explains that technology provides an overwhelming amount of accessible information and that technological tools are created daily and championed as ways to support learning. This can certainly be very beneficial, but only if pedagogic principles determine the use of such tools and using technology can only be justified if utilised appropriately. The research carried out here adds substance to this debate and encourages other EFL teachers to conduct similar research.

After developing an online course (see Appendix 1), it is beneficial to see how it would actually work in practice. Salmon's five-stage model (see Appendix 3), was used as a framework for the design of the online course, to provide scaffolding for the e-moderation process alongside the e-moderator's use of a reflective journal (see Appendix 2). This was then analysed by the researcher leading to the production of effective data. This research will be beneficial not only to EFL teachers interested in teaching online, but also give an insight to those already familiar with this environment. It is advantageous in development of personal practice whilst reinforcing the benefits of online learning. The research critically evaluates Salmon's five-stage model, in an attempt to analyse its suitability as an effective framework to assist practitioners wishing to pursue a similar experience outwith the classroom. An online

environment provides flexible learning, where students can connect with learners globally and are enabled to learn at their own pace. This dissertation evaluates my first experience of teaching online, and the impact Salmon's five-stage model had on my practice and development. The research carried out supports the claim that "teaching online is not the future anymore. It is an important part of the here and now of language teaching education. Teachers need to know what tools are out there and what techniques can help them use these tools" (Hockly and Clandfield, 2010: 3). Having discussed the rationale for this research an outline of the dissertation is now offered.

Chapter Two – the *Literature Review* - provides an outline of the theories applicable to learning online and demonstrates their integration into e-learning models, which are used as a framework to scaffold the e-moderation process. A detailed analysis of the e-Learning Ladder (Moule, 2007), Skills Pyramid (Hample and Stickler, 2005) and in particular Salmon's (2004) five-stage model, will all be presented to emphasise the complexity of skills necessary and scaffolding required for successful e-moderation. It is beneficial for this specific study - which provides a theoretical understanding and an informed basis for the skills required to effectively teach online - to focus on current research and the particular models mentioned.

Chapter Three - *Data Collection* - details the context of this research and demonstrates the appropriateness of conducting qualitative, self-study research whilst emphasising the advantages of utilising a reflective journal as a beneficial method to collect data. It is explained that such a methodology not only provides new understandings and insight into the e-moderation process but points towards informing pedagogy and to developing and transforming practice.

This is further illuminated in Chapter Four – *Analysis and Results*. Analysis of the reflective journal was carried out and a focus on the specific research questions forms the basis of categories e.g. 'teacher's role', which assists in uncovering and explaining what occurred. Thus the e-moderator's beliefs, perceptions and challenges encountered are disclosed and a detailed analysis of the findings in relation to Salmon's five-stage model is discussed. Revisiting Salmon's model is considered necessary to evaluate its effectiveness during this research. The benefits of such an analysis are thereafter outlined and a greater understanding of the e-moderation process is therefore achieved.

Finally, in Chapter Five - *Discussion and Conclusion* - the research is connected to and compared with the theories and models explained in the Literature Review. The effectiveness

of these models is revealed in relation to this particular study. Furthermore, the strengths and weaknesses of this research are discussed, leading to a proposition for further research opportunities.

The research questions are detailed below, followed by a literature review considering the essential issues relating to the dominant theories associated with online learning and the skills needed for e-moderation. Thereafter an analysis of the models provided to scaffold the e-moderation process is discussed.

## **1.2. Research Questions**

The following questions were addressed, in accordance with teaching in an online environment and provided a purpose and focus for the research:

- Does Salmon's five stage model adequately prepare an e-moderator for the complexity of an online language learning environment?
- What is the teacher's role in an online learning environment?
- What challenges does an e-moderator face, when teaching online for the first time?
- What are the e-moderator's beliefs and perceptions about teaching, within an online language learning environment?

Chapter Two outlines the Literature Review which will provide the necessary knowledge and understanding to assist in addressing these specific questions.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

A wide variety of literature is available relating to the challenges to be faced and strategies required for effective online teaching (Beetham and Sharpe, 2007; Conceicao, 2007; Pachler and Daly, 2011; Vlachopoulos and Cowan, 2010). Such literature acknowledges what positive effects technology can have on pedagogy and suggests many ways to improve practice and to support the learning experience through the introduction of effective design and appropriate, informed activities. Unfortunately they do not specifically address the issue of what skills are needed to successfully teach online, accentuating instead the gaps in the literature. Nevertheless, Hample and Stickler (2005) emphasised the need to address what approaches and skills are required, whilst Compton (2009: 96) acknowledged the complexity of identifying the necessary skills concluding that "more research needs to be done to identify these skills and responsibilities". Further research has also contributed in showing that an effective online learning environment can be enhanced by the e-moderator maintaining, and creating, a supportive online learning community (Goodfellow and Lamy, 2009; Senior, 2010). "Teachers must learn to recognise the social processes that technology enables and understand how to support these processes as a way to foster the emergence of meaningful communities" (Wenger, 2009: 191). In accordance with this current research, the Literature Review will describe the various theories which relate to learning online. It will provide a detailed analysis of three models, which take into consideration these theories along with the skills needed to effectively teach online. The comparison of such models is necessary in order to highlight their strengths and weaknesses and to enable analysis as to whether they can provide helpful scaffolding for new e-moderators.

### **2.2. Computer Mediated Communication**

Advances in technology have led to greater opportunities for the online learning process. Although some teachers still use technology to support a teacher-centred approach, the dynamics of this exciting and innovative environment, can now make it possible for teachers to change their pedagogy, along with a largely student-centred approach. This type of approach provides an effective alternative to the more traditional teacher-centred practice with the introduction of more interactive and collaborative Web 2.0 tools which, if used properly,



can create more meaningful and communicative tasks, where peer interaction becomes a necessary activity. Carr (2010: 117) agrees with this in stating that "The net's interactivity gives us powerful new tools for finding information, expressing ourselves, and conversing with others." It is, however, important not to rely on these tools for effective learning but they should rather be used wisely in tandem with employing pedagogic skills:

Online teaching is as much about creating, communication, support and interactions as classroom teaching is: we still have the teacher, the students, the language. The main difference is that the all-important human elements are mediated by machines.

(Hockly and Clandfield, 2010: 31).

When developing tasks, the teacher should think carefully about the most effective way to stimulate and engage student interaction and along with this encourage student centred learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Pritchard, 2007). Accordingly, learners need to become aware of their responsibilities during the learning process. By the introduction of a variety of group tasks and enabling access to a wealth of information from online sources, students can develop individually, whilst at the same time benefitting from interaction with peers. This provides a catalyst for development of the construction of collaborative learning. Murugaiah and Thang (2010: 23) acknowledge that; "it is evident that for online learning to benefit ESL students, it must incorporate social interaction, collaboration and reflection."

The co-construction of knowledge through collaboration relates to the Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). In accordance with this theory, learning does not occur in isolation but rather from interaction with others. Constructing an online course should adhere to these constructivist principles, which encourage opportunities for meaningful collaboration between students. They are consequentially enabled to reflect on their own ideas and how these compare with those of others. Learning within such a social environment is essential for an effective learning experience (Adams, 2006).

### **2.3. Theories of Learning Online**

There are many advantages of learning online and the enrichment it gives to education. It provides a suitable platform for language learning, where communicative and authentic tasks can be implemented within an environment where different cultures can interact and create meaning (O'Dowd, 2007). In addition, the enhancement in Web2.0 tools makes it more possible to stimulate and encourage collaborative intercultural communication, where

learning occurs through active participation within a supportive community. In acknowledging the benefits of online learning, Warschauer and Kern (2000) emphasise that learner-centred and communicative learning are highly suitable within an online environment. This is very much in accordance with the sociocultural and social constructivist approaches to learning. The constructivist and connectivist theories of learning, as well as communities of practice, relate to face-to-face contexts but nevertheless are particularly suitable for teaching and learning online. Constructivist theory views knowledge as socially constructed instead of being transmitted (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Adopting a learner-centred approach, the teacher focuses on the experience which students bring to a particular situation and empowers them to build on this by paying particular attention to individual needs and aspirations. Pegrum (2009) explains that through active collaboration, students engage in authentic and dynamic interaction, depending on each other to successfully complete tasks together. In addition, Felix (2002: 12) explains that the constructivist approach to learning is well suited to the affordances of the internet, because of the "potential to engage students in real experiential learning with exposure to meaningful, goal-orientated activities in authentic settings." In support of, and closely linked to this approach, connectivity as proposed by Siemens (2004) is also considered necessary for a sense of community to occur. Because of the physical separation experienced in learning online, it is even more essential to establish a social presence in order to avoid isolation and dislocation.

Rovai (2002) also considers connectivity in stating that it relates to the strength of social cohesiveness and integration created, which depends on nurturing and development of relationships within a supportive environment. Whether face-to-face, or online, the teacher's role should take account of the development and maintenance of connections, to ensure the most effective ways to influence and support learning. An online course will not foster connectivity and social constructivism on its own, but rather both teacher and students are required to supportively maintain and develop a sense of community together. Communities of Practice (CoP) as defined by Wenger (1998) are exemplified by a dynamic and meaningfully engaged community, where learning is mutually constructed together within a shared context. CoPs provide a platform for self-expression and, at the same time, collaboration within supportive groups creating a multitude of learning partners. The internet provides an environment to form communities without boundaries; accessible around the world regardless of differing time zones. Wenger (2009) suggests that the e-moderator should also adopt the role of technological steward, to assist in facilitating the learning within a

community. This role requires the selection of appropriate tools suitable to the community's interests, whilst at the same time recognising the constraints of technology and the tolerance of the community in using specific tools. Despite these technological concerns, Wenger (2009: 185) emphasises the potential of the internet to "enable the formation of communities we could never have imagined before." Dudeney and Hockley (2007: 152) assert that "using software that actively encourages the development of COP further enhances the social constructivist nature of the learning taking place."

There is a great deal of research on the theories used to effectively learn online; however there seems to be less focus on how the tutor develops their teaching practice online and whether such practice clashes with our own assumptions and pedagogic beliefs. In response to this, O'Dowd (2009) accentuates the need for further research into the experiences of the e-moderator. Senior (2010: 146) asserts that teachers should widen their conceptualisation of practice and realise that online teaching requires a complexity of roles, because "if they continue to define their roles narrowly, teachers will find themselves increasingly marginalised in the rapidly-changing educational landscape of the 21st century." The role of facilitator is considered a necessity when teaching online. This raises the question of what should be done if the tutor's facilitation is ineffective, and what other roles should be considered to effectively teach online.

There have been several attempts to address these questions. The early identification of roles required to support and develop learning considered cognitive, social and pedagogic facilitation (Berge, 1995). Later Salmon (2004) proposed a more modest role for the e-moderator, which does not require responsibilities associated with tutoring, or even expert knowledge of the subject matter. This role rather views the e-moderator as a facilitator of online discussion and a 'guide on the side' as described by Collinson et al. (2000). In contrast, Garrison and Anderson (2003) assert that the e-moderator's role holds more responsibility, in encouraging interactive opportunities towards achieving learning outcomes. They further assert that the online environment cannot replicate the same skills that are employed when teaching face-to-face but advise that other skills are needed to teach in such an environment. Vlachopoulos and Cowan (2010) however, suggest that the skills needed to teach language online are similar to those employed in face-to-face classroom situations. Earlier studies by Oliver and Shaw (2003) and Aviv et al. (2003) asserted that there was a significant improvement in online discussion when the e-moderator influenced and guided students to engage. Further studies have emphasised that the e-moderator's role does not just involve

support, but also requires an active and challenging stance, with high levels of involvement in fostering adequate interaction amongst students (Oliveira et al., 2011; Oncu and Cakir, 2011). Conceicao (2007: 6) affirms that "online instructors may take on a variety of roles depending on the tasks performed during the design and delivery of the online course and influenced by learner characteristics, content and course environment." From these studies, Vlachopoulos and Cowan (2010: 214) "suggest that the design and facilitation of online discussions should recognize that interaction does not just happen, but must be intentionally designed into the task and its facilitation". Furthermore, they state that studies need to be conducted to research the impact of different types of facilitative intervention and to recognise how tutors develop whilst teaching online and notice what support is required during the process.

To assist the teacher in the task of teaching online, there are several helpful models of learning to draw upon including Salmon's five stage model, the e-learning ladder and the skills pyramid. The following sections will outline these three models, detailing the underlying theories, analysing the similarities and differences of each, and their appropriateness for the e-moderation of an online language learning course.

#### **2.4. Salmon's Five-Stage Model**

Salmon's (2004) five-stage model (see Appendix 2) provides a structured framework which incorporates the Constructivist Theory, providing necessary scaffolding to support the e-moderator in developing and enabling successful learning amongst students. Adopting such a model will assist in giving adequate guidance to teachers, so that they can become more aware of the stages encountered throughout the process of online learning. It emphasises the realisation that learning online is a social process, essentially requiring collaborative activities which are skilfully initiated and moderated by the teacher.

E-tivities (Salmon, 2002) are designed in accordance with each stage of the model and these should both motivate and engage students, to interact and contribute to an online community. During the process, the e-moderator must evaluate student participation whilst stimulating conversation, summarising interaction and generating constructive feedback. Furthermore, it is essential that the moderator responds quickly to student messages and ensures that anyone not participating is contacted directly and provided with necessary support. It is important to identify problems which could be encountered during this process.

First, students need to be able to access the course online and it is essential that students are made aware of the technological requirements before starting the course. Beginning any course can be difficult and certainly any problems with technology can lead to frustration, which can be alleviated by providing students with adequate technical support to enable their participation.

Secondly, students within the group may be at different stages in their development and as such, the e-moderator needs to cater for a wide range of abilities. The overall philosophy of the course and the design of e-tivities can considerably impact on how students develop throughout the process. Salmon's model is more concerned with an asynchronous environment, focusing on interaction and using easily accessible platforms such as online forums. Its central themes and methodology can nevertheless be used as a framework to assist a more blended environment, using a variety of tools in order to stimulate meaningful communication. It is evident that this model is very effective in supporting online communication of a variety of different professions. However, it is uncertain whether it can effectively be adapted to support an online language learning community and it gives no indication of what time is required to complete each stage. In addition, its linearity seems to be restrictive, in that it does not take into consideration the implications of using a variety of platforms, or of introducing new tools throughout the developmental process.

Salmon's popular model remains a dominant framework in demonstrating a coherent, process based model for teaching and learning online. Employing a constructivist approach, it takes into account the learner's participation and the e-moderator's role in facilitating learning and technical skills required throughout the stages. In objectifying such a model, it can easily be adopted to aid the design of online learning environments often without considering particular contexts and learning styles. This oversight can be detrimental and as such the rigidity of its linear structure should not be overlooked. Practitioners need to be very careful in the reification of such a model (Lisewski and Joyce, 2003). Furthermore, the restrictive design of the model can prove to be ineffectual in long term usage. As it has been exclusively designed for a fully online environment, it remains inflexible when applied to a blended environment. Jones and Peachey (2005) adapted Salmon's model to incorporate a face-to-face element at the start of the learning process. This proved to be effective initially, in assisting with access and technical issues and also encouraged and nurtured co-operation and socialisation before introducing the online asynchronous environment. Their experience highlighted that the

stages in Salmon's model did not occur in a linear fashion, but rather different stages seemed to be appropriate at different times during the course.

It is therefore apparent that Salmon's model does not adapt well to a less formal context and additionally, as it does not integrate a face-to-face component, its structure appears to be inflexible and too rigid to apply directly to blended courses. Moule (2007: 39) argues that "through slavishly applying the model as a rigid course, any opportunities to develop flexibility and reflexivity are lost." In response to this, Salmon (2007) does not advocate her model to be used rigidly, but instead suggests that it should be adaptable to a variety of contexts and different technologies applied, further asserting that it can also incorporate face-to-face learning. Moreover, in her recent edition of 'e-moderating' (2011), Salmon proves that the five-stage model can be adapted to scaffold teaching and learning, in virtual worlds such as Second Life, thus illustrating the flexibility of the model (see Appendix 4).

## **2.5. The e-Learning Ladder**

In a critique of the perceived weaknesses to Salmon's model, Moule (2007) created an alternative conceptual model - 'The e-Learning Ladder' (see Appendix 5). In acknowledgment of the diversity of learning approaches, it incorporates both instructivist and constructivist approaches to learning, along with an emphasis on forming a community of practice. Instead of a staircase of stages, this model represents a ladder analogy which offers a variety of pedagogy which can be adopted to suit a particular course. The bottom of the ladder emphasises the instructivist approach to learning, where students explore and access information using the computer to source material and aid learning. At the top of the ladder, the constructivist approach is employed, with more creative interaction and engagement in accordance with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), showing that knowledge is created through meaningful communication. Both synchronous and asynchronous forms of online communication are taken into consideration, indicating the strengths of each in stimulating communication and the creation of knowledge.

The formation of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), sits at the top of the ladder and this can only be achieved by interaction throughout the learning process. Learning within this environment evolves with increased social interaction and a community is formed, where each participant develops individually as the group strengthens. Along with the constructivist approach, research has looked at the possibilities for development of a Community of Practice

(CoP) in an online context. The socialisation stage in Salmon's model, which emphasises interaction and collaboration, can provide the catalyst needed to develop online communities. In analysis of online dialogue, research has shown the presence of CoP characteristics such as mutual engagement (Rogers, 2000). However the validity of such studies is questioned, resulting from the small sample size and also the limited period of engagements made during research. CoPs require sustained relationships with continual interaction and sharing of information, requiring a longer period of time. Furthermore, the disparity of contexts can create difficulties for participants in developing trust and working together within a group.

The sides of the e-learning ladder indicate the support needed throughout the e-learning process. The right hand side of the ladder acknowledges that technological and access issues are on-going. Such issues can unfortunately create a barrier to successful learning and because of the increasing complexity of the online environment, can be problematic (Monteith and Smith, 2001). It is therefore essential that continuing support be maintained to nurture and develop students' ICT skills. This can be achieved by providing the necessary support needed to become confident with the technical skills required, in order to access and effectively use a variety of e-learning tools and platforms. In addition to the technical support provided, social and pedagogic support are also necessary and these are placed on the right hand side of the ladder. Tutor facilitation should be continuous in supporting socialisation and maintaining interaction within the group (Monteith and Smith, 2001). The emergence of a Community of Practice will only occur if students spend sufficient time engaging in meaningful communication, whilst also developing a history together as a group. This cannot be achieved in a short time frame, as this can reflect on the environment, with participants becoming less committed to forming a rapport within the group. In addition, lack of time spent in the initial stages of interaction can prove to be detrimental and therefore extra time needs to be spent fostering collaboration within the group. In accordance with the constructivist approach, the development of cooperative relationships can lead to a positive impact on the overall group performance. Although Moule's model adapts Salmon's model to include an instructivist approach and face-to-face learning, it also adopts it as a framework which engages learners to develop towards more independent and reflective learning, whilst at the same time displaying features representing a CoP.

The tutor's role in both models remains that of a facilitator, who implements technology and intervenes appropriately. However, Moule's model asserts that this role is required consistently throughout the process, as technological problems will continue to persist and



students will stay motivated by appropriate and engaging feedback. What both models do not consider, however, is what happens once learners have actually developed the required skills to learn confidently in an online environment and this should be allowed for in the future. The teacher's role in an online environment is certainly more than just that of facilitator. The teacher needs to take account other issues including pedagogy, managerial skills, social aspects and technical competence (Maor, 2003). The tasks encountered by the teacher can be overwhelming and it would therefore be beneficial to implement team teaching, where each teacher could take responsibility for different roles and share the complex task of e-moderation. Constant monitoring and evaluation are also needed, to make sure that students are constantly interested, challenged and encouraged to focus on the tasks provided. Murugaiah and Thang (2010: 22) indicated that the tutor "has to design activities that not only engage the students productively, but are able to motivate and move them towards self-directedness."

Murugaiah and Thang's (2010) recent study demonstrated that the initial apprehension experienced by students contributing in an unfamiliar environment was slowly changed by them becoming more active in group participation. They showed that it takes time for students to adapt to an environment which does not rely on face-to-face communication demonstrating that learning occurs when students are more relaxed and they start to form a closer bond with their peers. One problem encountered with their study was that several students were unable to engage fully because of other commitments and because of sociocultural factors. They somehow felt that it might be impolite or disrespectful for them to comment on other students' posts. A communication barrier was certainly evident because of the absence of face-to-face interaction.

In order to resolve these challenges, it is therefore important for tutors to be aware of such issues and to make sure that they are available to guide and scaffold students, whilst offering advice and attending quickly to any problems encountered. In addition, tasks should take into consideration several factors, including cultural background, group size and age of participants (Koh and Hill, 2009). Although there are certainly many challenges to be faced, the benefits to online learning more than outweigh any problems encountered.



## 2.6. Skills Pyramid

Hampel and Stickler (2005) produced a skills pyramid, in an attempt to address these challenges (see Appendix 6). The first three levels of the pyramid relate to technological requirements and also the skills required in assessing any benefits in using such applications and how they can be used to produce effective Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) activities. Levels Three and Four relate to online socialisation and communication. Socialisation is very dependent on meaningful interaction between participants and in establishing a sense of community. In this regard, the tutor needs to have strong communication skills in order to stimulate participation and maintain interest in the course. Furthermore, effective task design is extremely important to assist in interaction and to encourage social cohesion. The top two stages of the pyramid require use of certain skills to enable critical evaluation and appropriate selection and design of resources along with online tools which can mediate communication. Moreover, the tutor needs to understand when, and how, to support and encourage students with opportunities to interact. When reaching the top of the pyramid, the intention is for tutors to have acquired a variety of suitable skills required for teaching online language learning. At this stage, teachers should now be able to exert their own teaching style, using skills already obtained, continuing to make the most of the resources available, whilst maintaining a strong rapport with students despite any lack of visual cues or restrictions.

Hampel and Stickler, emphasised that the skills required to specifically teach online language learning are different from those required for other subjects or those employed within the classroom setting. Understanding how to use the technology is certainly a requirement, but in itself is not adequate and instead there should be a greater focus on pedagogy. Rather than teachers having to acquire relevant skills through their own self-study, there needs to be more explicit instruction and guidance for teachers. "Clarification of key competencies is crucial for online language teacher training, since teaching online requires skills that differ from traditional language teaching as well as teaching other subjects online" (Compton, 2009: 76).

In addition Compton (2009) argues that the only skill specific to language learning within the skills pyramid, is that required to facilitate communication. This could therefore be used as a framework for different teaching contexts, being not necessarily only applicable to language learning. Furthermore, she states that the sequential nature of the pyramid is problematic, as some stages of the pyramid occur concurrently and higher stages may actually be obtained

before lower skill levels. In addition, it is not made clear when the teacher will become competent with the necessary skills and be ready to put them into practice.

In response to this, Compton developed a framework (see Appendix 7) which would instead address only the main skills specific to teaching an online language learning course. The three key skills in this model are technology, pedagogy and evaluation, with levels of expertise attached to each, ranging from novice to proficient and finally expert. The technology skills relate to the teachers' familiarity and understanding of the affordances of technology in relation to online language learning. Being able to identify and evaluate the pros and cons of CMC technologies, whilst showing awareness of the differences between synchronous and asynchronous communication, is an essential skill needed in determining the most suitable software required to assist tasks. "The proficient teacher is capable of drawing on the software's existing features to facilitate the language learning process including content delivery, online interactions and course management" (Compton, 2009: 83). The pedagogical skills relate to the knowledge of strategies and theories used to facilitate communicative language learning, develop communities and foster a learner-centred environment to encourage negotiation of meaning and cultural sensitivity. This can be achieved by providing clear instructions, encouraging interaction, mediating communication and providing purposeful and engaging task based activities (Willis and Willis, 2007). The evaluative skills section relates to the importance of conducting continual formative evaluation, to determine whether desired outcomes are achieved.

Along with these three skill areas, Compton also provides a detailed description of the tutor's responsibilities, asserting that the tutor should support and motivate students to actively participate, and try to increase their confidence with more self-directed learning. A successful online learning experience can be ensured, through encouraging students to increase their responsibility for more autonomous learning (Benson, 2007), whilst providing sufficient opportunities for them to meaningfully interact (White, 2003). In order for the tutor to fully understand the challenges encountered and realise the strategies and skills required to effectively teach online, it is extremely beneficial for them to personally experience what it is like to interact and learn online from a learners perspective. Certainly developing the necessary skills and techniques to facilitate socialisation and the building of a community can be challenging and tutors need to be prepared with a variety of skills for any difficulties which may arise. "More research needs to be done to identify these skills and responsibilities so that

language teacher preparation programmes can continue to improve and serve the needs of future online language teachers" (Compton, 2009: 96). Having duly investigated the current literature available and identified the particular skills and features required this can greatly assist future practitioners to improve their teaching practice in an online environment. Furthermore, this literature review has provided the reader with the necessary knowledge and insight into current research relating to this particular study. Therefore, the next chapter gives a detailed account of the context and specific methodology used in the research conducted.

## Chapter 3: Data collection

### 3.1. Research Method and Design

The design and approach used in the analysis and collection of data is largely dependent on the specific questions posed (Thomas, 2009). As mentioned in Chapter One the following questions were addressed, in accordance with teaching in an online environment and provided a purpose and focus for the research:

- Does Salmon's five stage model adequately prepare an e-moderator for the complexity of an online language learning environment?
- What is the teacher's role in an online learning environment?
- What challenges does an e-moderator face, when teaching online for the first time?
- What are the e-moderator's beliefs and perceptions about teaching, within an online language learning environment?

This study documented the introspective reflections of an e-moderator, whilst undertaking a one-month pilot online course for language learners. It took into account the interactions and challenges which were encountered throughout the process. The researcher's reflective thoughts were analysed with the benefit of previous experience, knowledge and theory, based on Salmon's five stage model. The data produced should provide insight into developing future practice; however, because of the overall subjectivity of this particular research, there were no attempts to make generalisations but positive suggestions were made to improve future practice.

Researching educational practice from the perspective of an outsider who is not directly involved with the teaching practice can be very challenging, because of the complexity of interactions and specific environmental constraints. There are many elements to take into consideration which may cause difficulties. For instance, a great variety of learners' beliefs and perceptions can influence the study of interactions within an educational environment. The research did not account for an outsider's perspective, which could be considered as a limitation therefore becoming a more subjective account. In this regard, Pring (2004: 123) acknowledged that the "privileged position of the teacher in educational research raises questions about the objectivity and impartiality of the researcher". However, the researcher

valued such a position and decided to adopt the role of the e-moderator, thus gaining a more personal insight into the e-moderation process.

Research was carried out over a four week period and involved the teaching of seven EFL students on an online language learning course. A purposive sample of students was chosen to suit the course requirements. They were of an intermediate/advanced level of English, lived in a target language removed context and had an average age of twenty-eight. The sample consisted of one Mexican, one Japanese, one Taiwanese, three Chinese and one German student. Differing nationalities were specifically chosen to emphasise the global nature of learning online. This was a new and meaningful experience not only for the e-moderator but also the students involved. In accordance with the BERA (2004) guidelines, necessary steps were taken to ensure that all participants fully understood the purpose of the research process. Although the e-moderator was the only participant in this self-study research, there was still a requirement to make sure that students were informed of the nature of research, in the unlikely event that their privacy was put at risk. Therefore, before the course started, the students were made aware of the requirements of the research project, including the length of the course and their rights to withdraw during the process (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Students were also informed of technological necessities and requirements in order to participate in the course. Following from this, consent was given by participants for any relevant information produced during the course to be later used as data. Such data was then stored securely and if published in future, students were notified that anonymity would then be assured to protect their privacy. Because the research was conducted online, the privacy of participants was a particularly important ethical issue for consideration (Thurlow, et al., 2004). Thus the online course was made private and confidential, only accessible to the e-moderator and students. Furthermore, the e-moderator's online diary did not disclose any students' names. In accordance with Bruckman (2002), the manner of consent obtained online depends on the research conducted. Therefore, because of the low levels of risk to students in this research, they were only informed electronically via e.mail and consent was also given by this means. Conducting such research certainly informed the researcher's own practice, challenged assumptions and highlighted the complexity of teaching and learning in an online environment (Mitchell et al., 2005).

Self-study was the chosen methodology for this research with the underlying purpose of reflecting on and scrutinising the relationship between the complexity of practice and theory, with a view to informing pedagogy, improving practice and developing new understandings.

Loughran and Russell (2002: 227) assert that self-study is "about rediscovering the relationship between theory, practice and research, in a way that is more connected to, and reflective of, one's professional life" and this was the intention. In addition the research conducted was contextually bound and focused on a single perspective. It proved to be challenging; highlighting personal difficulties in confronting and assessing flaws which were revealed in personal practice. This revelation prompted real insight and provided powerful, positive data.

Self-study has proved to be an advantageous methodology for researchers wanting to understand and improve their own teaching practice, whilst at the same time providing meaningful insights for other practitioners (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004). Adopting this form of methodology seemed highly appropriate for the purpose of this particular research. Valuing the individual voice and personal thoughts of the researcher, in relation to their own situation, offers invigorating and rigorous research which can generate an insightful articulation of the theories and assumptions governing the researcher's own practice (Tidwell, 2002). Such methodology requires integrity and responsibility to be shown by the researcher and the researched. Placing the 'self' in this position can assist in gaining a depth of understanding on how beliefs and theories of teaching can differ when they are actually translated into practice. Paying particular attention to the actions performed within the present moment of practice, can reveal and assist in exploring and making more explicit the tacit knowledge brought to the situation which informs the actions (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, 2004). Uncovering and documenting this awareness helped in reforming knowledge, refining practice and should also benefit and guide other practitioners in changing their own practice.

Self-study however, not only gives an insight into the 'self' but relies on interactions with others in confirming assumptions and interpretations. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009: 20) explain that "although messy and contingent, working to articulate, alter, and understand these relationships, holds great potential for producing knowledge, actions and understandings that will allow practitioners to develop better practices." Collaborating and drawing on others as critical friends is an important part of this chosen method of self-study. At the start of the research process therefore, other ESL practitioners were consulted for suggestions and advice on how to improve the online course and provide hints and tips for effective teaching online. Developing an online PLN (Personal Learning Network) was extremely beneficial, providing encouragement and support throughout the initial stages of research. As described by Hockly

and Clandfield (2010: 108) a PLN "refer[s] to the way we integrate many sources of information and communication into our personal and professional development." Adoption of this methodology stems from the researcher's curiosity in understanding and learning more about teaching online and, in addition, whether employing a self-designed course in accordance with Salmon's five stage model could successfully translate into practice. There was also a desire to explore and illuminate what tensions, as well as successes, would be encountered when teaching within a fully online environment. The hope was that this whole process would provide new possibilities and, at the same time, enhance personal experience through using an online course whilst identifying whether personal beliefs, theoretical understandings and assumptions actually occur in reality.

Undergoing such research requires a very critical stance in uncovering and gaining insights into assumptions and influences which determine practice. In addition, identification and examination of the beliefs informing teaching can assist in responding to, changing and potentially transforming current practice (LaBosky, 2004). With a central focus on the 'self' in relation to the complex nature of teaching, this whole process can prove to be a daunting task. Adopting such an insider's perspective could, possibly, appear to be a self-indulgent exercise but its main concern was to uncover an understanding of our teaching practice and its effects on students' learning. Thus the "focus while apparently on the teacher 'self', is *always* on the student and how to create a meaningful learning environment" (Coia and Taylor, 2009: 16).

Methods chosen to collect data are varied and are dependent on the context being studied. The teacher's natural environment is the most appropriate setting to learn and enquire about the nature of their teaching whilst gaining a more reflective insight into such a particular environment. This can also assist in providing a clearer understanding of the context. In addition, the teacher's previous personal experience along with the social context could have an influence on actions made, whilst practice is continually being adjusted, depending on the needs of the students. This became more apparent when reflecting on the process.

The collection of data was designed to capture a comprehensive and coherent account representative of the research undertaken and assisted in providing evidence for the questions posed. Instead of relying purely on memory to reflect after the learning process occurred, the data was strengthened by recording the actual moment of practice as it happened, which was then reconsidered and evaluated in light of further inquiry. It is the responsibility of teachers

to remain open minded throughout the process and to modify practice in accordance with new knowledge obtained, through continually scrutinising practice and challenging assumptions. Loughran (2004) observed that an essential aspect of self-study is to share the interpreted data publicly to encourage diversity of opinion which will evaluate and critique findings obtained and thus gain further understanding of practice. In this regard, making the journal available by using an online blog, made it accessible to share with a global community of educational practitioners. The method for collecting data involved the e-moderator maintaining a regular journal of the whole process. The blog (see Appendix 2) was created to document relevant and important information, events and reflection prior to, and throughout, the four week course. Keeping a journal certainly required commitment and consistent effort, which proved to be very time consuming, as noted by Bell (2010). In order for this to work effectively, the e-moderator allocated strict and regular set times to write entries in the journal. Any revealing interactions with students were noted to strengthen the findings. Keeping a reflective journal provided the researcher with the opportunity to articulate and reflect on the actions taken and feelings may be expressed as they occur during the teaching-learning process. Recording not only successful occurrences, but also the frustrations and problems encountered throughout, provided fruitful insights leading to a greater awareness of current practice. With greater attention to a specific situation, it was possible to discover a clearer view of what is usually overlooked or avoided during day to day practice. Effective and purposeful journaling exposed the unique perspectives of the 'self' in relation to the teaching context and captured the feelings and reflections of the experiences during practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; Rager, 2005). As Kitchen (2009: 48) stated, it was apparent that using journals as a research method proved to be "valuable as artifacts for retrospectively interpreting patterns in experience in order to develop deeper insights into one's practice."

As previously stated, there are no attempts to make generalised claims about knowledge, but rather more focus was placed on ontology in relation to exploring experience towards developing and understanding practice as purported by Feldman (2003). Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009: 65) expand on this, in stating that "the orientation of self-study researchers toward ontology animates all aspects of our work as a guide for our study and as a commitment to developing environments that support human flourishing" and this influenced the approach taken. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) are also persuasive in noting that self-study is far removed from making claims about the uncertainty of knowledge associated with logical positivism. In preference to this, the epistemological stance has a constructivist approach to



knowledge, where understandings are specifically related to particular contexts, time and the interaction within that space. As such, it was imperative to make visible the context which constrains and shapes practice. Self-study aims to question and explore alternative interpretations in the process of constructing meaning and reframing practice. In doing so, it seeks to appeal to the trustworthiness and rigour associated with the qualitative research community (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1984, Mishler, 1990). It cannot be fully considered research until it has been made public and open to critique. Therefore, value and trustworthiness is open to the interpretation of the reader in accordance with their own beliefs, who determines whether the researcher acted with rigour and integrity in their assertions and provided convincing evidence of their claims.

### **3.2. Context**

The research conducted explored the e-moderator's role, beliefs and challenges encountered during the moderation of a one-month online course. In carrying out this particular self-study, not only did I practice as researcher but also as e-moderator and will therefore, for the duration of this research, refer to myself in these terms throughout. The online course – 'Global Imaginarium' (see Appendix 1), was created for intermediate/advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) learners who, because of their busy lifestyles, were otherwise unable to practice their English in a classroom setting. The design of this course was to enable students to practice their English language skills in an engaging and interactive environment, suitable for their own time schedule. Such an environment provides the stimulating opportunity to interact with learners from other cultures, where distance is not an issue. In accordance with Lankshear and Knobel (2006), learning within an online environment has the possibility to transcend constraints usually associated with the classroom. Having access to the internet provides a wealth of authentic and multimodal material which, if used appropriately, can produce meaningful and engaging activities. These, as indicated by Ng (2001), may be considered as both learner-centred and collaborative. The role of the e-moderator and choice of Web 2.0 tools, are particularly important for the success of the online course. This course was created in order to incorporate Web 2.0 tools specifically chosen to facilitate constructivist learning and, at the same time, provide learners with new opportunities to take control of their own learning. Moreover, whilst designing appropriate tasks, each tool was carefully selected because of its pedagogic value, taking into consideration sociocultural factors such as background knowledge, language learning needs

and individual goals. It is important to provide a brief description of each tool used and also their pedagogic value.

Skype is a popular internet phone service, making it possible to conduct free calls with other internet users. It was implemented in the course in order to offer learners with an effective one-to-one synchronous support with the e-moderator. Along with Skype, blogs were used as a form of journal, creating the basis for each activity and, as described by Lankshear and Knobel (2006: 139), these should be "largely interest-driven and intended to attract readers who have the same or similar interests and allegiances." Used effectively, they have the possibility to enrich collaboration and engage learners with the opportunity to develop meaningful and authentic communication (Davies and Merchant, 2009; Mompean, 2010; Murray and Hourigan, 2008). Interaction and collegiality, which are developed through asynchronous interaction over blogs, provided necessary scaffolding before introducing Second Life. Second Life (SL), is a virtual world "populated by avatars: virtual representations of SL members, known as residents" (Rymaszewski, 2008: 6). Such a platform provides learners with the opportunity to experience synchronous discussion in a highly immersive environment (Jauregi et al., 2011). In accordance with Campbell (2009), Second Life's experiential environment makes it possible for constructivist learning, where the students will contribute and learn from each other thus strengthening the group's Community of Practice.

Having described these Web 2.0 tools and outlined the context for this research, the next chapter will consider how effective these chosen tools were in supporting the e-moderator to create an effective online learning environment. This can be achieved by analysing the data obtained from the e-moderator's reflective journal.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

### 4.1. Data Analysis

This chapter details the procedure involved in analysing data obtained from the e-moderator's reflective journal and also details the method used for analysis. It is argued that qualitative data analysis is a recursive and rigorous process which can be time consuming and ambiguous, but can also be a creative and insightful experience (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). This was certainly the case with this particular research. In interpreting the qualitative data, obtained from the reflective journal (see Appendix 2), the researcher was very careful in identifying personal beliefs and the theoretical position influencing data, thus attempting to reduce any selection bias (Alaszewski, 2006). Whilst it is impossible to capture everything which occurs, it can provide an insight into further understanding the personal and subjective experience of the situation. It is true that "qualitative data analysis can describe, interpret and explain, but cannot hope to reproduce the full richness of the original data" (Dey, 1993: xiii). Therefore, the important themes and categories which emerged were compared and interpreted thoroughly, in order to provide a meaningful and illuminative analysis of the data produced (Thomas, 2009). Using the constant comparative strategy as a framework, the data collected was divided into manageable units to search for patterns, themes and categories (Dey, 1993; Ryan and Bernard, 2005; Thomas, 2009). Once broken down and re-assembled the data was made more open to provide a more meaningful representation of what actually occurred through the researcher's observations and to assist the reader to more fully understand what occurred during the research.

The resultant data was then developed so that a fresh description emerged considering the most salient themes for the underlying concerns of this particular research. Scott and Morrison (2006: 22) support this in stating that "for qualitative data analysts, a key task is to use categorisation in order to abstract the most important feature of the educational phenomena studied from detailed, thick and complex data." From focused and continual analysis of the resultant data, inferences were made and important themes identified. In order to focus more and further narrow the search, the researcher then decided to return to the underlying concerns of this particular research and reconsidered the initial questions posed, in order to provide a source for the main categories to be addressed. This was hugely helpful in assisting with analysis, and using the aforementioned questions as categories, matched

convincingly with the themes which had emerged. In accordance with Cohen et al (2007: 468) "This is a very useful way to organise data, as it draws together all the relevant data for the exact issue of concern to the researcher, and preserves the coherence of the material."

The analysis of data uncovered the thoughts and actions embedded in practice. In the discussion that follows, there are no definitive conclusions about the suitability of Salmon's five-stage model. The discussion does however provide some insights which could be further developed in future research. This study, therefore, offers some suggestions for improving practice and adds to the body of knowledge related to e-learning, online language learning, and e-moderation, although it is "contextually bound, tentative, provisional and constantly open to improvement" (Pring, 2004: 137).

#### **4.2. Teacher's Beliefs and Perceptions**

The course was designed for EFL learners from a target-language removed context to practise English, in a way which would be flexible to their needs and at the same time, not interfere with their busy lifestyles. Moreover such learning online, with students from a variety of different cultures, could provide learners with the opportunity to interact with others on a global scale which would otherwise be difficult for them to achieve. In creating such a course the e-moderator took account of Salmon's five-stage model and the underlying pedagogic theories to successfully learn in an online environment. Before beginning the online course, the e-moderator's concerns were clearly evident and some of the feelings expressed may well have been similar to those felt by the students. Not only was this the first time the e-moderator had experienced teaching online but it was also the first time that the students had embarked on learning online. Therefore, it is important to consider how the self-created course would translate into practice.

At one stage the e-moderator clearly expressed some apprehension about the potential success of the course and this led to a change in direction whilst also acknowledging that "when you finish creating a new course you feel very proud of what you have achieved and tend to not be as critical as you perhaps should" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.1.). It became apparent that the e-moderator could benefit from reassurance and much needed support from an online Personal Learning Network (PLN) and this provided advice and encouragement throughout the initial stages. Through embracing online social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, the e-moderator increased the PLN and from this, gained useful access to an insightful community of practitioners. This in turn increased the e-moderator's energy and enthusiasm

and gave assurance in helping to combat any feelings of worry and apprehension. In making the effort to contact others for reassurance and advice, the e-moderator felt that it made a difference to know that others were interested, and that the 'sense of community' encouraged continuance with the process (journal extract, see Appendix 8.2.).

Throughout the whole process there were concerns about whether students would be able to cope with the design and activities of the course and whether too many tools were utilised. These anxieties were particularly associated with technology and whether both the students and, indeed, the e-moderator were able to cope with Web 2.0 tools. More importantly, it was questioned whether they were all necessary and would effectively aid the constructivist learning required. Apprehension was also expressed about accessing the blog, understanding Second Life (SL) and in using Skype. The e-moderator was concerned with whether the amount of information provided and guidance given in the course blog was perhaps too much and overwhelming. Furthermore, there were uncertainties as to how meaningful the tasks to be performed were. Although there were insecurities and fears over possible difficulties which might arise there was also the realisation that "It [would] be an immense learning opportunity and at the end of the process [there would be a] greater insight into teaching online" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.3.).

A lack of interaction and some students regrettably dropping out of the course added to the frustration leading to the e-moderator questioning personal teaching abilities and perceptions. These considerations were off-set by the realisation that students have a variety of needs and different learning styles and that the course tasks needed to be flexible in order to cater for this. The e-moderator began to understand that uncertainties and difficulties would certainly happen regularly and that the unexpected would occur. Instead of being stressed and anxious, it became more productive to 'remain calm and carry on' with the process (journal extract, see Appendix 8.4.). It was very apparent that as the course progressed, both e-moderator and students became more relaxed with teaching and learning online and more confident in utilising the chosen Web 2.0 tools. The feeling was that the exercise had "been an insightful experience into the complex role of the e-moderator [who had truly] benefited from [the whole] process" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.5.).

#### **4.3. Challenges**

The predominant challenges encountered throughout the course related to time, technology and social-cultural factors. Time was certainly an issue for many of the students and several

students decided to discontinue the course because they were too busy to participate. This was ironic as the course was very much designed to cater for busy people. Students also claimed that they found the tasks difficult to complete on time. This prompted the e-moderator to appreciate more that the students had other priorities, and could only devote a certain amount of time to the course (journal extract, see Appendix 8.6.). Time was also an issue for the e-moderator and completion of the reflective journal became a concern. Because of a busy work schedule it was difficult for the e-moderator to regularly update the journal; however this whole process developed greater empathy for the students who were also required to write their own blog posts. Furthermore there was pressure to ensure that the journal was effective and it was 'difficult to write a blog post' when not feeling in the best frame of mind (journal extract, see Appendix 8.7.).

Whilst understanding that issues of time could have a serious impact on the course, this was further reinforced when trying to schedule synchronous meetings online to utilise tools such as Skype and SL. It became apparent that it would be problematic trying to arrange a meeting to suit students' various schedules and differing time zones. This was only made possible after careful planning and in using an online tool called 'doodle' (<http://doodle.com/>), making it suitable for creating schedules whilst taking into consideration availability and time differences. It was not only these time issues which needed to be addressed but also internet restrictions imposed politically by certain countries along with problems associated with the poor strength of internet connection. Chinese students were regrettably unable to access YouTube videos and some web-links attached to each task. Moreover, there was constant frustration experienced when trying to access Skype and SL caused by constant problems with logging on and temperamental sound quality. This situation was particularly problematic when students tried to use the internet during busy hours, as most people in their countries were accessing the internet at the same time and this seriously interfered with their network speed.

Issues with technology were evident throughout, with worries about students' lack of experience using Web 2.0 tools. Some of the practitioners from the e-moderator's PLN advised reducing the number of tools used and also voiced concern about the challenges imposed by virtual platforms such as SL. Another suggested that the e-moderator reduce expectations and proceed to gradually introduce students gradually to these new tools. This advice encouraged a reduction in tools used with a revision in what tasks were to be chosen, but could not address the unavoidable technical problems encountered which "hindered the

progression of tasks and created unneeded frustration [in] students" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.8.). It was not only the students who suffered inconvenience but also the e-moderator who also experienced problems with internet connection. There was a real concern that connections would be weak but certainly not an expectation that the e-moderator's "own connection would interfere with the course" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.9.).

When there appeared to be a lack of interaction by some students, it was difficult to know whether they were following comments made and choosing not to interact, exemplifying a term commonly known as 'lurking'. When interaction actually dried up, it was uncertain whether students were finding certain tasks more challenging and were, therefore, taking longer to complete them. Although students appeared not to be participating, there was a realisation that they could have been studiously carrying out tasks without other students or the e-moderator realising it. A further challenge was that it took some time and perseverance for students to understand how to use a blog. When one student, for example, encountered problems with publishing her posts this was resolved by the e-moderator assisting by sharing the screen over Skype and talking to her throughout the procedure. Empathy was demonstrated by stating that it must have been frustrating to "spend a long time writing a post and then not be able to publish it" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.10.).

Second Life also proved problematic. After encouraging students to explore SL, one student had an unanticipated, uncomfortable experience. The student tried to practise their English and engage with other avatars but was frequently accosted by rude and explicit comments otherwise known as 'flaming'. The e-moderator "was naively unaware of this happening in Second Life and from this found out that there can be a problem with griefers" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.11.) who will deliberately harass others causing unpleasant situations. Dudeney and Ramsay (2009:23), explain that "griefing describes the action of disturbing other users to limit the user's ability to carry out his/her intended aims in-world." In addition, Ball and Pearce (2009: 55) point out that 'griefers' are "trouble makers in Second Life, who can orchestrate anything from harmless pranks to sustained assaults." This was something unexpected which must be considered when using the internet for learning purposes. In response to this, care was taken to ensure that a comfortable and safe environment was chosen for subsequent synchronous meetings in Second Life. With considerable support and guidance, the students found these tools to be beneficial despite the challenges encountered.



#### 4.4. Teachers' Role

Having discussed the challenges encountered it is now appropriate to focus on the e-moderator's role throughout the process. As previously stated, it was highly beneficial for the e-moderator to form a supportive PLN. This is possible through social networking and by opening oneself up to an encouraging online community which provides reassurance and constructive criticism. Receiving encouraging e-mails from other practitioners provided motivation and a sense of engagement. Furthermore, the e-moderator should constantly learn from this community, which exemplifies the constructivist approach to learning where the e-moderator can construct knowledge from critical friends, in order to develop personal practice. This process is therefore similar to the students' development and growth of their own particular Community of Practice where receiving timeous feedback from the e-moderator and regular interaction with peers provides extra enthusiasm to feel connected and part of a supportive community. It was certainly apparent that it was "extremely necessary to engage with students and install a humanistic element, so that they realised that even though there [was] a cyber-barrier created there [was nevertheless] still connection and support available" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.12.).

Along with the qualities of enthusiasm and encouragement, the e-moderator always needs to be prepared for the unknown and to notice and solve problems as they occur. Challenges similar to those faced by the students are experienced and in understanding these challenges, empathy can be shown to students and reassurance provided. One example of this occurred when a student was having problems with the internet. The e-moderator had previously encountered similar problems and could therefore "empathise with feelings of detachment. In light of this, an encouraging and reassuring e.mail was [sent which was] important" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.13.). Positivity is essential and it is important to pass this on to students and to motivate and engage with them. Moreover, task design is crucial and therefore should be well planned, resulting in purposeful and worthwhile activities to appeal to a variety of students. It is beneficial to evaluate and change tasks accordingly, remaining flexible and student-centred depending on students' needs and expectations. Evaluation was evident throughout with, for example, the e-moderator questioning whether instructions were understood or the purpose of a particular task was appreciated.



#### **4.5. Salmon's Five-Stage Model**

Salmon's model was used as a scaffolding to provide a structure for the course and accompany the e-moderation process. Each task was carefully designed in relation to the five stages. Before detailing how the model related to this particular research it is helpful to revisit it and give a brief description of each stage.

The first stage in Salmon's model - Access and Motivation (Salmon, 2004) - provides an introduction to the course. A welcoming message should greet students and clear instructions given on how to access the course together with a list of requirements to enable participation. The e-moderator will engage with and encourage students, whilst supporting them with any technical guidance. Basic activities are initially provided to ease students into such a new and unfamiliar environment, so that they can become more comfortable and confident in proceeding. It is essential that these activities are worthwhile and enable collaboration and involvement, whilst developing comfortable usage of the technology. In addition, this stage of the model considers the apprehension and frustration which students tend to encounter when starting an online course. The teacher should therefore attempt to reassure and establish a rapport with students, motivating them to work together and addressing effectively any queries or technical problems.

Stage Two - Online Socialisation (Salmon, 2004) - should break the ice and welcome students to their new online community. Students are informed of online etiquette and given an outline of the course. At this stage, students are encouraged to introduce themselves to the other members of the community. Both individual and group identities are developed through the sharing of opinions and ideas. Moreover, an exchange of information should establish collaborative learning and in so doing, develop trust within the group. During this stage, students are encouraged to develop a comradeship through the sharing of ideas with their peers and by exerting their online presence in an environment which increases the student's confidence in being able to interact and co-operate with others.

In Stage Three - Information Exchange (Salmon, 2004) - the e-moderator encourages students to search for purposeful information, to exchange their findings with the community and to take more control of their own learning. This is made possible by students interacting with the course content and by sourcing relevant information which is then shared with their peers. In order for this to be achieved, the tutor needs to provide appropriate tasks which suit students' needs (Salmon, 2002). Such tasks should be carefully implemented by providing

clear guidelines, which inform students of their roles within the task and also state what is expected of them to successfully complete it. It is important to indicate how to access and find useful information for the benefit of both themselves and the community. In addition, the e-moderator should encourage group development by prompting discussions, asking questions and summarising any findings and outcomes. Clearly structured activities should be provided which encourage engaging discussion and interactive participation. If successful, the students will become more familiar with Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and, in so doing, gain an understanding of group dynamics and how to operate successfully as a community.

By Stage Four - Knowledge Construction (Salmon, 2004) - it is of utmost importance for the teacher to support and encourage students to interact but also to contribute to the construction of knowledge (Beldarrain, 2006). There should be a constant 'buzz of discussion' amongst students, as they supportively challenge and build knowledge together. Here, the e-moderator should facilitate learning by introducing themes and by providing spark questions, with the aim of encouraging a range of views and answers for exploration and further development. Interactivity is essential, as students begin to evaluate existing resources and develop their own. If successful, this should encourage discussion to provoke critical thinking and reflection, summarising and emphasising key points.

Following this, Stage Five – Development (Salmon, 2004) - is a culmination of all the skills acquired during this process. Students should by now have the confidence to take responsibility for their own learning. They are more able to focus on and apply what they have learned towards their own needs and goals, and to reflect critically on the learning process. Both students and the e-moderator should now be comfortable learning together in an online learning environment. The e-moderator now takes a less active stance and supports students in taking control of their own learning, encouraging self-reflection and criticality with the aim of them becoming more self-directed. Consequently, they become more responsible for their learning and so show more commitment to their own development.

The e-moderator had experience of putting into practice all the stages prior to the course commencing. Accessing and forming a PLN provided the needed motivation to socialise with encouraging practitioners, sharing information, constructing knowledge together and finally developing more confidence in the e-moderation process. Each of the five stages took effect naturally and provided an efficient and effective way to becoming comfortable in the process and feel more secure with teaching online.

Access, motivation and socialisation occurred during the first week of the course, with students gaining access to the course blog, introducing themselves to the online community and interacting asynchronously with each other by writing short comments. Initially, the students did not appear to be spending enough time interacting together and there was a realisation that it would take time for students to socialise and that it should not be expected for this just to happen (journal extract, see Appendix 8.15.). However, it did not take too long for this to take effect, and socialisation occurred after synchronous one-to-one meetings with the e-moderator over Skype. Live communication with students online was important not only for students to express any concerns but also for the e-moderator to motivate and reassure them. "It seem[ed] that the Skype session made the course more personable and engaging due to [this] face-to-face element" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.16.). From this development their initial apprehension about using blogs to interact was replaced with enthusiasm, when they realised the benefits and, additionally, noticed that writing posts would provide a reference for others to interact with. Students expressed their personal thoughts and frustrations whilst others responded with supportive and friendly advice. They were clearly reading each other's blogs and showing an interest by writing comments and a stream of interaction occurred on each student's blog. The e-moderator was highly encouraged by this, stating that he was "delighted that students [were] engaging with each other and did not imagine it would be so productive in the first week" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.17.).

After such a positive start to the course it was surprising that there was then an absence of communication and lack of contribution from students. In despair, the e-moderator "felt that the course was starting to crumble around [his] feet and [he] searched inside for an answer [as to] why this was happening" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.18.). The answer was thankfully found once again from the one-to-one teacher-student synchronous interaction over Skype. Students appeared most to contribute to the course by completing tasks just before a synchronous meeting and also increased interactions with other students after such meetings. These one-to-one meetings with the e-moderator provided motivation to complete their tasks and to encourage interaction and sharing of information with others and students started to share information thus demonstrating Stage Three of Salmon's model.

As the course progressed, and to provide further encouragement, the e-moderator constantly sent motivating emails to students when there was less activity. Stage One of Salmon's model was evident during every task with the e-moderator assisting with access problems when using tools such as Skype and Second Life. It was extremely important to provide motivation

and encouragement to engage students in the knowledge that they were constantly busy with other lifestyle demands. Planning and preparation were also essential to make sure that the course provided e-activities appropriate to each of Salmon's five stages. In accordance with Salmon (2011: 125) "teaching online needs careful planning and preparation, otherwise the stories will continue of e-moderators being overloaded and burnt out by the work." Although tasks were completed using blogs, the asynchronous interaction was not consistent and while the e-moderator tried to encourage students it was not as successful as planned. However, students expressed that they benefitted from sharing their thoughts and by the end of the course felt comfortable writing blog posts. Salmon's five stage model was most evident when using SL for synchronous group discussion. Scaffolding students through Task One and Two assisted students to become comfortable with socialising online, sharing information with each other and they started to form a community of practice.

Students were given an induction in SL by the e-moderator prior to the group meeting which assisted with access and motivating students to take part in subsequent meetings. Both students and the e-moderator expressed apprehension about the Second Life environment, but this apprehension was thankfully replaced with enthusiasm and positivity. The e-moderator facilitated and managed the discussion and students appeared to share their opinions and construct knowledge together. The e-moderator "really felt that students were very involved in the discussion and was inspired by their contributions" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.19.). This was further strengthened in the last SL meeting with the e-moderator feeling that "Second Life really injected some much-needed energy and provided a platform for students to interact synchronously in a supportive environment" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.20.). Students evidently displayed Stages Three and Four of Salmon's model and also appeared to be showing development. The e-moderator believed that "this session in Second Life was [extremely] reflective and students took more control over the process" (journal extract, see Appendix 8.21.). It was apparent that when used loosely as scaffolding for the e-moderation process, Salmon's model was an important factor in the success of the course. However, it regrettably did not fully prepare the e-moderator for the complexity of teaching online and discussion regarding this follows in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1. Discussion

Having analysed the data obtained from the self-study research, it is now appropriate to evaluate what has been achieved, what understandings have been reached and how the findings can be used to improve future practice. Therefore, discussion will follow as to how this particular research contributes, and connects, to other research conducted within a similar field and how successfully it attempts to answer questions and issues raised in previous studies. Finally, the researcher will consider what further research is considered necessary in order to address any unresolved issues and concerns which have arisen from this study.

Without previous experience of teaching online, the e-moderator displayed anxieties, concerns and insecurities which could have affected the process. In retrospect, although models such as the e-Learning Ladder, Skills Pyramid and five-stage model (previously discussed in the Literature Review), can provide helpful scaffolding, they cannot fully prepare the e-moderator for the complexity of challenges faced during the e-moderation process. Having experienced first-hand the role of e-moderator it was then necessary to evaluate the various tasks undertaken, pedagogy employed, technical and personal support required and to reconsider the e-learning models in relation to this research. Salmon's five-stage model and the Skills Pyramid (Hample and Stickler, 2005), both suggest that learning online is a systematic and sequential process. Both models share a commonality in that they emphasise the importance of developing socialisation whilst providing adequate technical support. One outcome of this particular research is the proposal that these aspects should certainly be given appropriate and careful attention throughout, and there is an additional argument in support of Moule's (2007) e-Learning Ladder that there should be no clear linearity of individual stages. Rather, careful support and nurturing of socialisation should be a continuous process and the e-moderator needs to pay particular attention to maintaining a strong, interactive and cohesive group of participants. In order to accomplish this, the initial design of tasks and planned involvement of the e-moderator are extremely important. In accordance with Vlachopoulos and Cowan (2010), the e-moderator needs to be heavily involved in encouraging and motivating the development of collaborative interaction between students. Sufficient technical support is required and when utilising new tools, extra time is needed for students to become more comfortable with their usage and to understand how they can effectively be

used to encourage and enrich socialisation. The data produced in this research reveals the temperamental nature and inconsistencies experienced when using technology to support learning and it consequently indicates that the usage of such technology requires continual support, empathy and encouragement.

As explained, both socialisation and technology should receive continual attention, whether using synchronous or asynchronous tasks. Although Salmon's model was particularly intended to support asynchronous learning it is also adaptable to synchronous learning, whereas Moule's e-Learning Ladder explicitly considers both asynchronous and synchronous learning. It is evident from this research that synchronous tasks were more collaborative and although asynchronous tasks formed a basis for socialisation, considerably more involvement and attention were needed to stimulate asynchronous interaction. The researcher found this aspect to be of particular interest, deserving further research in order to investigate this difference more thoroughly. Salmon's model is certainly highly effective because of its adaptability; however the e-moderator needs to understand that particular attention should be given to their own area of practice. This unfortunately can be neglected when concentrating entirely on Salmon's model and this may have been the case in the e-moderator's practice whilst undertaking this research. In acknowledgement of this possible pedagogical neglect, Compton (2009) specifically focuses on the related pedagogy to be put into practice through providing a descriptive model detailing the necessary skills required to teach language online. Although it is not as malleable and concise as Salmon's model, it nevertheless gives more insight into the particular pedagogy required to effectively teach online learners. Perhaps future practice could benefit if this could be integrated and used in parallel with Salmon's model. Focusing explicitly on Salmon's model is not enough to foster an effective online learning experience and, as stated by Pegrum (2009: 53), "There's no substitute for well-trained educators who, through careful planning and intensive engagement with technological, pedagogical and broader issues, can maximise the educational relevance of digital technologies."

The constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasises a learner-centred and communicative stance formed the basis of each task. However the e-moderator's journal did not explicitly mention the pedagogy and theory employed and whether they were conducive to effective learning online. In hindsight, this would have been beneficial and should be considered in future research. It was however apparent that synchronous discussion using Second Life incorporated several opportunities for constructivism and established

connectivity whilst demonstrating social interaction, collaboration and reflection. These components are specifically mentioned by Murugaiah and Thang (2010), as being essential for online learning. On the other hand, asynchronous interaction proved to be less successful in practice, therefore prompting the need for a reconsideration and evaluation of tasks which required such interaction, accounting for individual needs in order to promote more interactive and constructive learning.

The virtual learning environment and Web 2.0 tools chosen for the course are of particular importance and with reference to Wenger (2009) the e-moderator should adopt the role of tech steward in considering the constraints of using certain technologies and their appropriateness to students' needs and tolerance of usage. However, the selection and implementation of Web 2.0 tools, which should encourage discussion and emphasise the constructivist approach to learning, does not necessarily result in collaboration as was found to be the case here. The choice and preparation of task, which students will undertake, is extremely important and therefore the e-moderator paid particular attention to the interests and needs of the group whilst taking into consideration sociocultural factors. It was found that in establishing a momentum of successful constructivist learning, a spark was needed to stimulate and encourage students to contribute and engage with the chosen task or topic of discussion. As described by Salmon (2002) a 'spark' is the stimulus or start provided to encourage interaction. One example of using a spark was when students were asked to complete the end of a sentence such as, 'I have always wanted to visit....', which then led to greater discussion around their chosen answers. Skinner (2009) asserts that if this spark is not provided then it can prove detrimental to the progression of the course.

The e-moderator's practice benefited from Jones and Peachey (2005) who demonstrated the importance of including a face-to-face element within the course whilst also considering the implications of Salmon's model. Their study demonstrated that a face-to-face workshop prior to a course commencing was highly effective in assisting students with accessing the course, addressing technical issues and fostering subsequent socialisation. Regular face-to-face discussions with students were extremely important. This was achieved by the e-moderator arranging sessions with students via Skype and also enabling synchronous group discussions in Second Life. These proved to be pivotal in encouraging socialisation and interaction between students. White (2003) also influenced practice by indicating the strength of added synchronous assistance through implementing telephone tutorials into a course. This extra assistance offered advice and support whilst, at the same time, negotiating student needs and



monitoring their progress throughout. The e-moderator consistently welcomed the implementation of synchronous one-to-one support sessions as they provided the opportunity to reassure, motivate and engage with students encouraging them to complete tasks and at the same time enabling the e-moderator to address any persistent difficulties.

Utilising a journal as the chosen method for data collection proved to be effective in understanding the introspective thoughts of the e-moderator. However, after rigorously analysing the reflective journal, it was recognised that the e-moderator perhaps used it more as a personal diary to document feelings throughout the process. Although considerably insightful, they did not fully represent the richness of interactions or indeed consider the pedagogy employed during the process. It is therefore necessary for future practice to seriously consider the purpose of using a journal prior to conducting research using this particular method. Future research should include space to analyse more of the synchronous and asynchronous interactions demonstrated throughout the course with particular focus on feedback, motivation, reassurance and facilitation provided by the e-moderator. This would inevitably produce additional data to further explore the role of the e-moderator. In addition, and in accordance with Senior (2006) the e-moderator's journal should disclose the complexity of roles associated with e-moderation and demonstrate that facilitation is not the only role required. The e-moderator therefore also needs to constantly motivate and engage students and consistently monitor their progress throughout.

Utilising self-study methodology was effective for the purpose of this particular research. In focusing on the e-moderator it did, however, neglect the students' perspective. Future research will acknowledge this and a case study will be conducted which analyses the students' interactions thus providing clearer indications and further proof of the stages detailed in Salmon's model. From an evaluation presented at the end of the course it was evident that certain stages of the model were present giving an indication of its effectiveness. When asked about the technical support provided one student stated; "the technical help was good. SL was a challenge, but the group meeting and exploring together helped a lot" (evaluation extract, see Appendix 9.1). This gives an indication of Stage One (access and motivation) and Stage Two (socialisation) of Salmon's model. The same student noted "the most important thing I gained from this course is friendship" (evaluation extract, see Appendix 9.2) which indicated the importance of the socialisation stage. The constructivist approach and social cultural awareness were evident in the following feedback; "It was very interesting to see, that when we live in different countries and [have] a different upbringing, we have something in



common. The love for music and nature, the dream to travel to other countries and learn about people at the other end of the world" (evaluation extract, see Appendix 9.3). Such feedback and evaluation of the course is beneficial for the e-moderator to reflect on and provides insightful data to analyse thus providing additional results to further understand the effectiveness of the e-moderation employed.

During the research process, the e-moderator was uncertain how much general intervention and encouragement should be provided, in order to nurture interaction between students. Similarly, Moule (2007) reiterated this challenge in demonstrating the necessity of having such mediation for students to remain engaged but, at the same time, emphasised that a balance is needed, as too much interference can essentially stifle student interactions. She further stated that research results obtained were potentially weak, because of the small sample size used to conduct the research and emphasised that this factor, along with a limited amount of time, reduced the possibility of students forming a Community of Practice. These factors were present here and may have had an impact on the lack of opportunities for a variety of interactions. In acknowledging these factors Murugaiah and Thang (2011) also indicated that it takes time to become acclimatised to such a learning environment. The e-moderator needs to understand these factors and to make efforts to consider sociocultural factors whilst finding the most effective ways to reduce both their own initial anxieties and also those of the students through effective motivation and engagement. Therefore, in any future study, it would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal research to gain an understanding of what occurs over a much greater time period.

## **5.2. Conclusion**

As identified in the Literature Review, more research should be conducted into the experiences of the e-moderator highlighting the development and support required and the skills and responsibilities needed for successful e-moderation. This particular research attempted to address some of these needs and to provide the basis for subsequent research. It further explored the requirement needed to improve practice along with providing insight and greater awareness of the e-moderation process; all with a view to supporting new e-moderators in their efforts to teach online. Although encountering a steep learning curve, the opportunity for the researcher to fully experience the e-moderation process has been an extremely informative and enlightening experience. Despite the problems and frustrations encountered en route, the positive aspects far outweigh the negatives and the researcher is

very much aware that the benefits of the study are clearly worthwhile. Self-study research has proved to be highly rewarding, providing an awareness and understanding of the knowledge and requirements needed to undertake such a challenge. This has proved to be a constructive journey, in reflecting on and evaluating practice, which can prove to be beneficial to others in providing a valuable insight into this process.

This research has emphasised that teaching online not only requires facilitation and a sound knowledge of learning theories, but also an awareness of the complexity of other roles needed to become an effective e-moderator. Such roles were identified using Salmon's five-stage model and proved to be effective in scaffolding the process, although not necessarily preparing for the demands of successful e-moderation. These demands were fully realised through writing a reflective journal which was extremely beneficial in enabling the expression of frustrations and feelings throughout whilst identifying the variety of problems encountered. Making this journal available online means that it can be accessed and used as an effective document not only to identify what may happen in the process, but also to assist other practitioners who are similarly developing e-moderation skills and are new to, or about to start teaching online. From rigorously analysing the journal it is strikingly evident how important it is to form an online Personal Learning Network to support and reassure the e-moderator and consequently reduce anxieties.

Before teaching online, it is essential to consider technological constraints and to carefully select appropriate Web 2.0 tools to complement constructivist learning. Furthermore, the e-moderator needs to be prepared to engage with and motivate students by providing well thought-out e-tivities (Salmon, 2002) and adopting a positive and encouraging attitude. Teaching language learners online has the added potential to break down cultural barriers and provide them with the confidence to effectively interact within a comfortable and supportive community. This can only be achieved by effective e-moderation and therefore teachers need to be fully aware of the skills involved to do this. Previous teaching experience is not sufficient to be able to effectively teach online and certainly, from this research, it is suggested that undertaking some form of training, including specific experience of learning online whilst exploring the affordances of technology is essential. This would give a greater understanding of, and an empathy with, what students will experience and also provide an awareness and competence with the e-moderation process. From the data analysed it was clear that Salmon's five-stage model was considerably effective for scaffolding e-moderation. However, it is evident that such a linear framework should not be used solely, but also

considers other aspects. It is suggested therefore, that the e-moderator acknowledges sociocultural factors and in particular the pedagogy employed to suit the specific course. This online journey leaves this new e-moderator with greater confidence, the benefit of previous research, theoretical understanding and practical experience in working through the various challenges associated with teaching online. This process will therefore not only lead to better practice on a personal basis, but will also assist others wishing to be involved in this exciting and rewarding venture.

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## Appendices

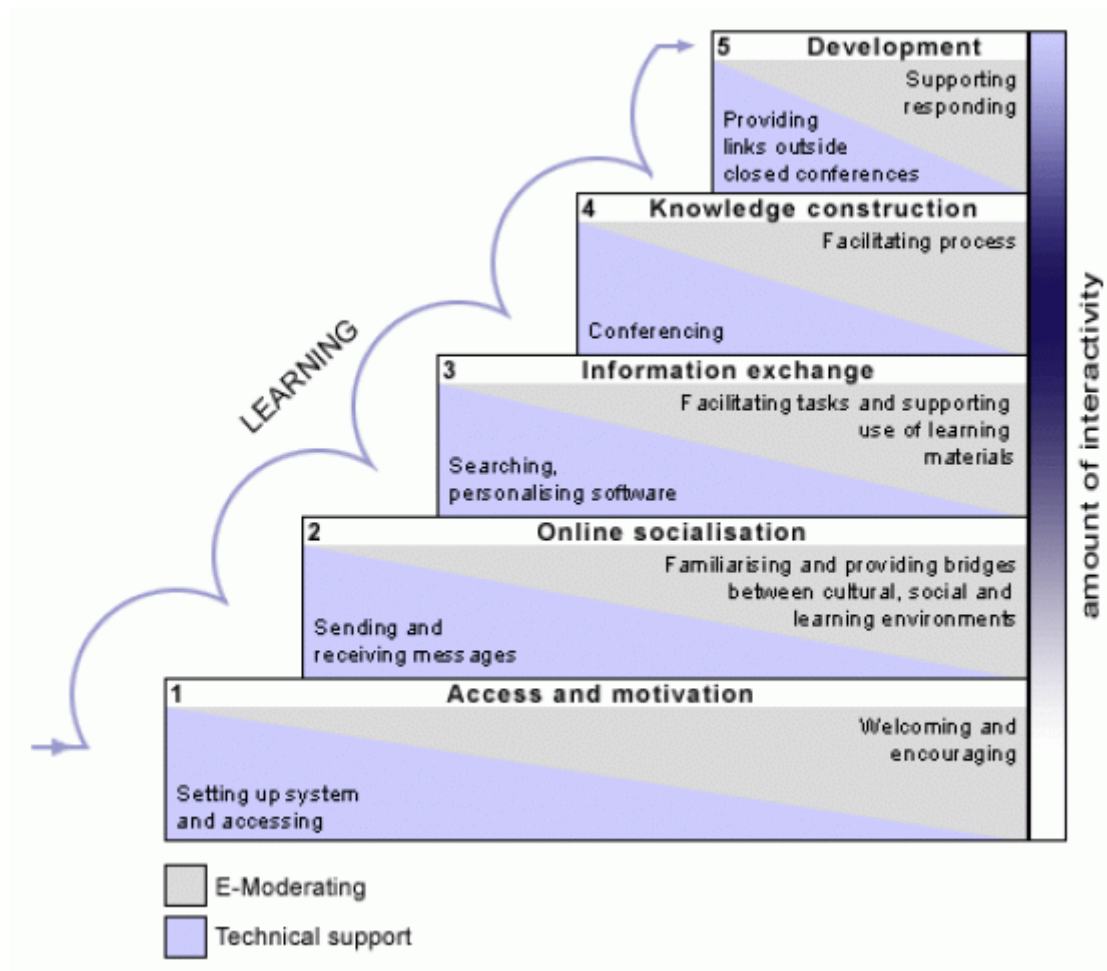
### 1. Online Course

Global Imaginarium: <http://globalimaginarium1.wordpress.com/>

### 2. Reflective Journal

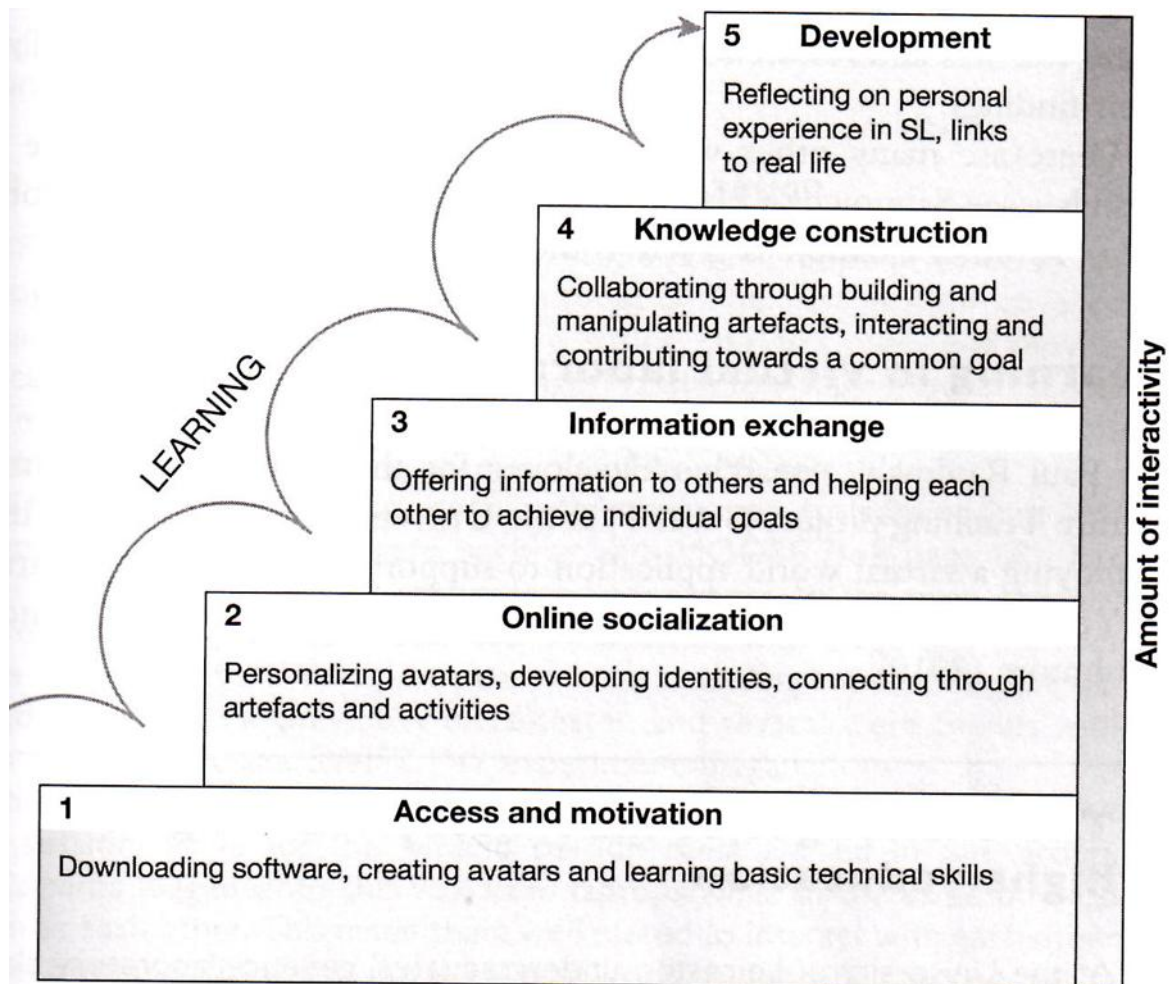
Reflective Imaginarium: <http://reflectiveimaginarium.wordpress.com/>

### 3. Salmon's Five-Stage Model



Salmon, G. (2004: 26). *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

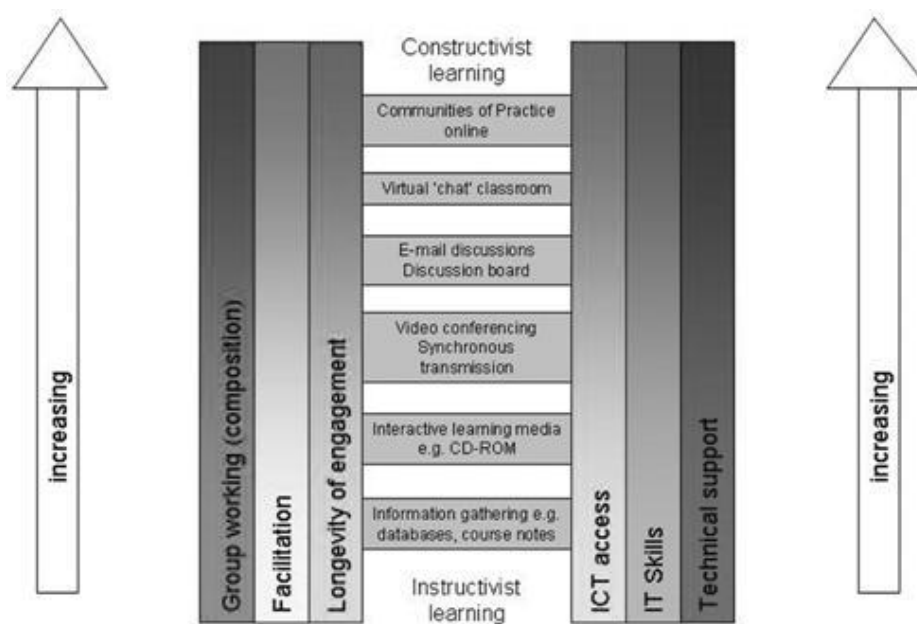
#### 4. Salmon's Five-Stage Model adapted for Second Life



Model of teaching and learning in 3D virtual worlds

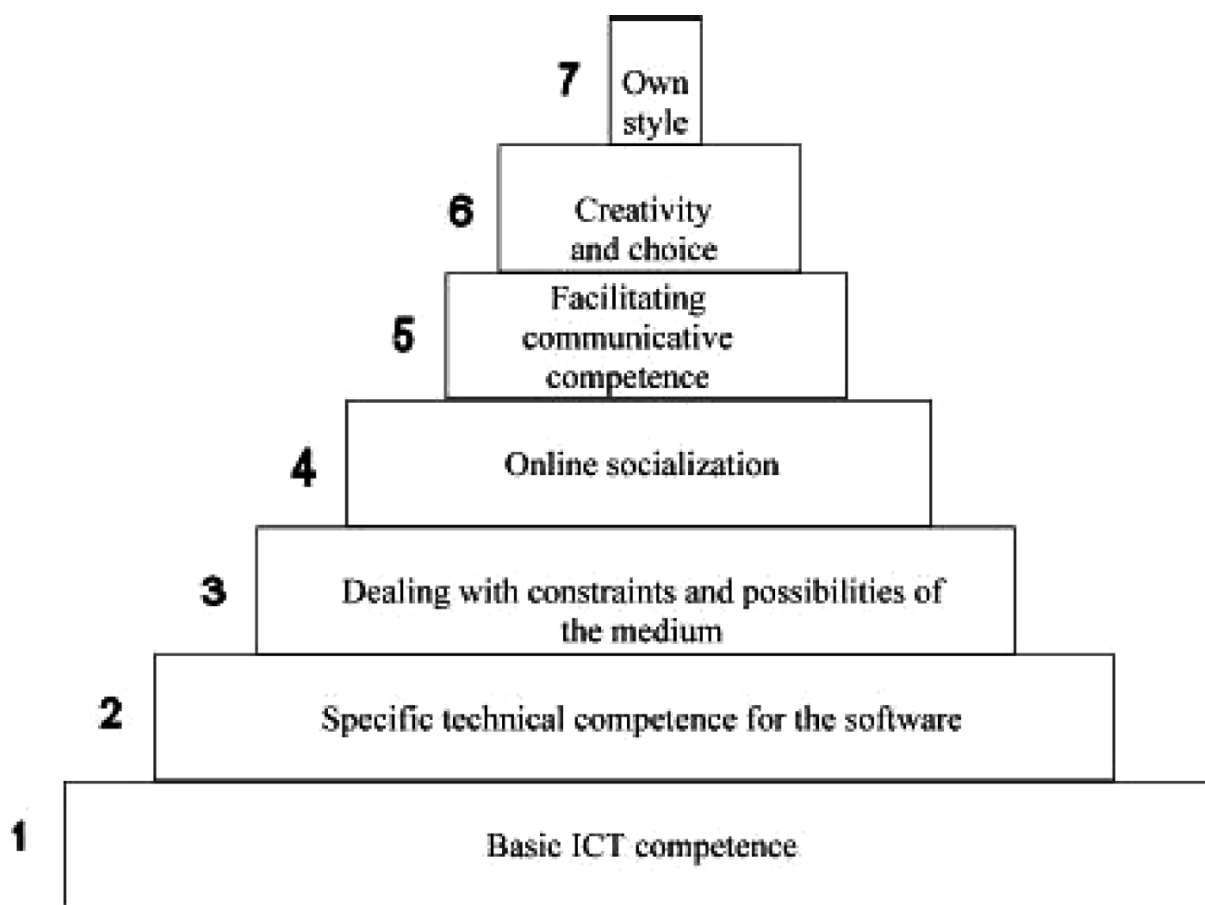
Salmon, G. (2011: 81). *E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

## 5. The e-Learning Ladder



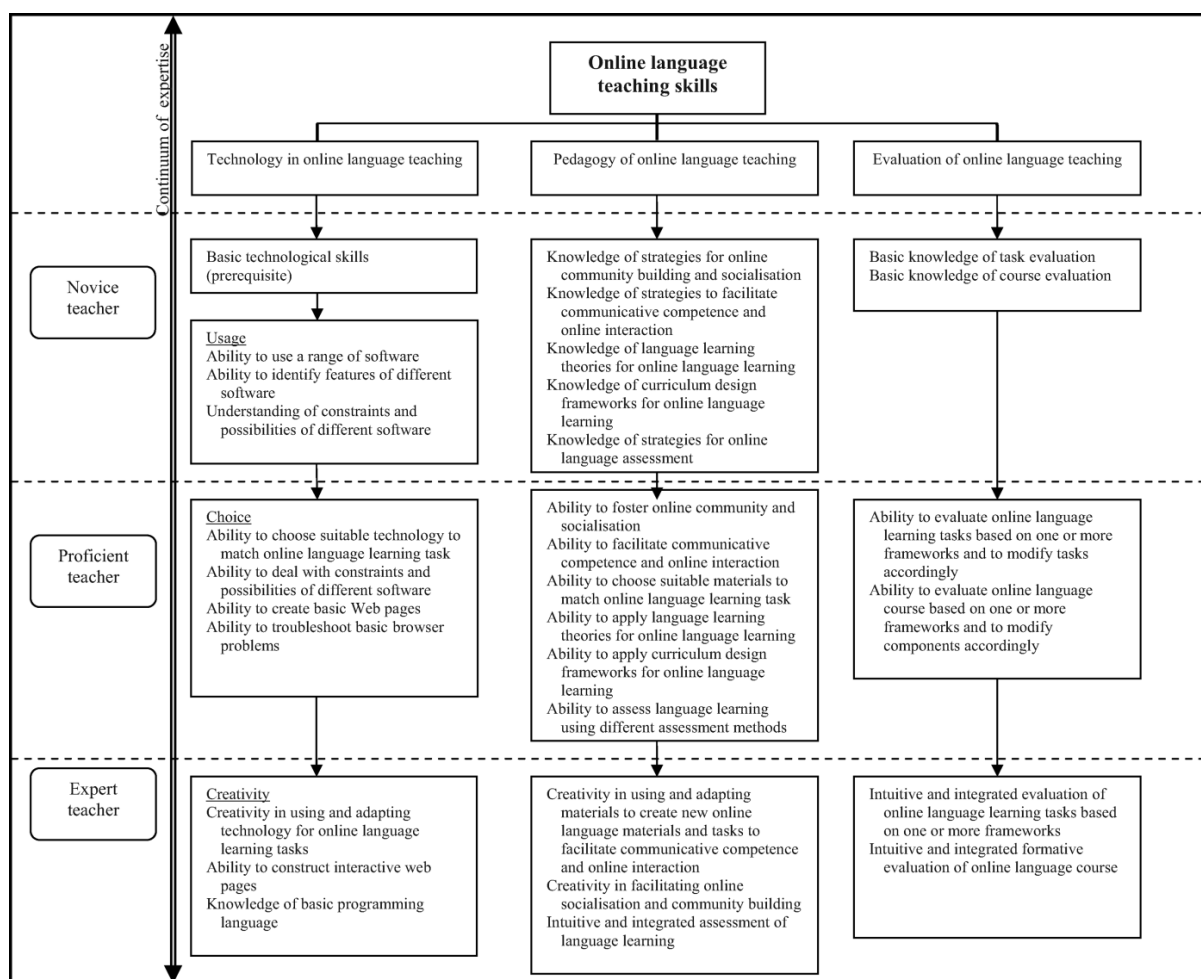
Moule, P. (2007: 41). Challenging the five-stage model for e-learning: A new approach. *ALT-J, Research in Learning Technology*, 15(1): 37-50.

## 6. The Skills Pyramid



Hample, R., & Stickler, U. (2005: 317). *New skills for new classrooms: Training tutors to teach languages and learning online* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: MIT Press.

## 7. Online Language Teaching Skills



Compton, L. K. L. (2009: 82) Preparing language teachers to teach language online: A look at skills, roles, and responsibilities. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 22(1): 73-99.

## 8. Journal extracts taken from the e-moderator's blog-'reflective imaginarium'

<http://reflectiveimaginarium.wordpress.com/>

### 8.1. *Finding participants (How difficult can it be?)* May 13, 2011

I reckon my first problem was believing that my snapshot of a course was innovative. When you finish creating a new course you feel very proud of what you have achieved and tend to not be as critical as you perhaps should. The more I step away from the course the more I see changes that need to be made. However I view it as a template which can be adjusted depending on my students needs.

### 8.2. *The search continues (try not to panic).* May 14, 2011

It's astonishing how twitter is such a powerful tool to create a buzz and connection with other practitioners. It really makes you feel that there are people interested and the sense of community encourages me to continue.

### 8.3. *Making Changes.* May 25, 2011

This is all very new to me and I suppose I was naive in thinking that I could incorporate so many tools into a short course. Furthermore, I don't have any experience teaching online so this will be a challenge and I fear that it will become a very stressful experience. However, I'm sure it will be an immense learning opportunity and at the end of the process I will have a great insight into teaching online.

### 8.4. *Keep Calm & Carry On.* June 20, 2011

Although students are not interacting as much as I would like to see on their blogs I think that the gathering in SL really injected some much-needed energy and provided a platform for students to interact synchronously in a supportive environment. It is uncertain what will happen each week and I need to understand that certain things are out of my control will occur and instead of becoming stressed I will have to remain calm and carry on.

### 8.5. *The finishing line becomes the starting line.* June 26, 2011

It's now time to reflect on the process and use this as a basis to improve future practice and redesign the course to offer future participants a more beneficial experience. This has



been an insightful experience into the complex role of the e-moderator and I've truly benefited from this process.

8.6. *Searching for a spark.* June 11, 2011

I managed to talk to the other student over Skype and they stated that they were very enthusiastic and excited about the course but due to starting a new job they could not find the time to start the first task but would try their best over the next week to start interacting with other students and dedicate more time to the course. I need to realise that students are very busy and will not be able to dedicate all their time to the course. I feel that I should encourage them and make sure I'm available for any advice or assistance but there is only so much I can do and if they are too busy then I should understand and try not to impose the course on them.

8.7. *Trying to avoid burn out.* June 20, 2011

This week has been extremely frustrating and I feel that my initial enthusiasm has burned out. I need to pick myself up and continue with positivity. I find it difficult to write a blog post when I'm feeling lethargic and I don't feel that it can fully capture my feelings.

8.8. *Searching for a spark.* June 11, 2011

I encountered several technical problems this week which hindered the progression of the tasks and created unneeded frustration with students. One student was unable to publish her new blog entry and sent me several e-mails detailing her frustrations.

8.9. *Trying to avoid burn out.* June 20, 2011

This is my first blog post this week as I have encountered problems with my internet connection which has meant that I have been unable to be fully available for corresponding with the students. It could not have happened at a worse time and I'm really hoping that the connection will be fixed in time for the SL meeting. I was concerned that my students internet connections would be weak but never expected that my own connection would interfere with the course. Conducting a course online relies on a consistently strong network connection and it is extremely frustrating when technological problems occur which are out of my hands.

8.10. *Searching for a spark.* June 11, 2011

I can imagine how frustrating it must be to spend a long time writing a post and then not be able to publish it. I hope that this will not demotivate her to publish more posts.

8.11. *Initial anxieties can be overcome.* June 7, 2011

One student in particular stated that they had already tried to communicate with others in SL but had a very unsettling experience. They only wanted to practice conversational English but were frequently harassed and unsettled by some very explicit propositions. I was naively unaware of this happening in SL and from this found out that there can be a problem with griefers who can make the SL experience very uncomfortable. I reassured the student and advised her to be careful as some places should not be visited in SL. I will make sure that students are aware of this and point them in the direction of places where they can safely practice conversation.

8.12. *Trying to avoid burn out.* June 20, 2011

I'm unsure how much attention I should provide and whether this will create too much reliance. However, I do feel that due to the nature of teaching online and the lack of physical presence that it is extremely necessary to engage with students and install a humanistic element so that they realise that even though there is a cyber-barrier created there is still connection and support available.

8.13. *The finishing line becomes the starting line.* June 26, 2011

Unfortunately one student was unable to access the course this week due to not having any internet connection and therefore couldn't attend the SL meeting. I can imagine he must have been really frustrated. Due to having similar problems myself last week, I can empathise with his feelings of detachment. In light of this, I sent him an encouraging and reassuring e.mail, which I feel is important.

8.14. *Searching for a spark.* June 11, 2011

The task instructions should be clear and the purpose made explicit so that students can understand why they are carrying it out. Perhaps my instructions are unclear and the purpose of the task may be vague. These are things I need to think about and consider when planning my tasks.

8.15. *Learning to juggle.* June 4, 2011

At first I was encouraged to see that students were using the comments boxes to introduce themselves but they did not seem to be interacting with each other. I need to realise that it will take time for students to socialise and I can't expect it to just happen.

8.16. *Learning to juggle.* June 4, 2011

It was very effective to talk with students and I was able to gain an understanding of how they were feeling at this early stage. After talking to the students on Skype I noticed that they started to comment more on other student's blogs and they also made more blog posts. It seems that the Skype chat made the course feel more personable and engaging due to the face-to-face element. At the same time students could practice their speaking and listening skills and share personal anecdotes.

8.17. *Initial anxieties can be overcome.* June 7, 2011

I'm very fascinated by the buzz of interaction and the students are sharing their thoughts and interests as well as their frustrations. Some posts in particular have created a surge of responses with some very personal and heartfelt communication. I'm delighted that students are engaging with each other and I didn't imagine it would be so productive in the first week.

8.18. *Trying to avoid burn out.* June 20, 2011

I felt that the course was starting to crumble around my feet and I searched inside for an answer to why this was happening. I thought that my course was not working and that the reason students were stopping the course was because it was too time consuming or unsuitable to their needs. I need to realise that it is uncertain what will happen during the course and I can't make myself fully responsible for students dropping out.

8.19. *Keep Calm & Carry On.* June 20, 2011

I decided use a more learner-centred approach where the students could practice their English and use it to share their own experiences and knowledge to interact with other students in a way that was personal and meaningful to them. I really felt that students were very involved in the discussion and I was inspired by their contributions. At the end of the session the students were extremely grateful for the experience and expressed

enjoyment and positivity with the lesson. They thought that it was very relaxed and different to more conventional lessons.

8.20. *Keep Calm & Carry On.* June 20, 2011

Although students are not interacting as much as I would like to see on their blogs I think that the gathering in SL really injected some much-needed energy and provided a platform for students to interact synchronously in a supportive environment.

8.21. *The finishing line becomes the starting line.* June 26, 2011

After ten minutes of exploration I teleported them back to the classroom to discuss their experiences with which they were very enthusiastic about. I believe that this session in SL was reflective and students took more control over the process.

## 9. Evaluation extracts

**Taken from feedback provided on the course blog and an end of course survey conducted on SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>).**

**Prior consent was provided by students to use their extracts for research purposes.**

- 9.1. In response to the question: *Are you happy with the technical help you have received?*  
28<sup>th</sup> June 2011:

"Yes, the technical help was good. SL was a challenge, but the group meeting and exploring together helped a lot."

- 9.2. *General comment on the course blog.* 28<sup>th</sup> June 2011:

"From the course I know how to use a tool like Second Life to learn English, to meet different people and to explore different places. I haven't written any blogs before, even a Chinese one. But now I enjoy writing blogs and sharing thoughts and feelings with you; I feel happy to see any comments on my blog as well as comments on your blogs. The most important thing I gained from this course is friendship."

- 9.3. *General comment on the course blog.* 27<sup>th</sup> June 2011:

"I learned about SL and how to deal with it. That was really something new. The blogs we had to write were challenging and commenting on the others' blogs was good. I liked reading your posts and your opinions. It was interesting to hear you all speak your mind and find out about your countries and everyday life. Thanks for sharing your dreams and wishes for the future as well. It was very interesting to see, that even when we live in different countries and have a different upbringing, we have something in common. The love for music and nature for example, the dream to travel to other countries and learn about people at the other end of the world."